

L I F E
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LIFE MOVIE REVIEW

The Spy Who Did What and to Whom?

A DANDY IN ASPIC

Have you been worrying lately about the fact that you can't understand spy movies any more? That even while you are enjoying the hell out of them you feel a little guilty because you leave the theater totally bewildered as to who won, or why? Well, relax. The outcome *should* be irrelevant to your enjoyment. In fact, tidy, simple explanations, can often, as I will try to demonstrate, decrease the fun.

I didn't always feel this way. I watched a dozen of these luscious, fanciful new confections—like *The Ipcress File*, *The Deadly Affair*, *The Quiller Memorandum*, even *The Spy Who* etc.—and thought the film editors must accidentally have cut out of each of them a piece of footage that explained all the plots. It was a real relief when I discovered there was no necessity to understand.

A Dandy in Aspic, the newest one, is a perfect case in point. Spies and counterspies hotfoot it around a Berlin which never looked lovelier. Actors—skillfully cast down to the smallest role—provide exciting, clever scenes. The film has everything—but logic.

Ostensibly, Laurence Harvey (who wound up directing *Dandy* when Anthony Mann died on the job) works for British intelligence, but he's really a Russian. As a double agent, he dislikes both affiliations: the Russians won't let him come home and the British send him to Berlin to catch a mysterious assassin named Krasnevin who is, in fact, himself—the ultimate in existential navel contemplation.

—by Maurice Rapf

Instead of finding an easy substitute "victim," he spends his time trying to jump over the Wall or into bed with Mia Farrow.

Immediately you have questions: why is Harvey so unhappy about tracking himself down? Isn't that better than having someone else do it? And why the yen to go home to Russia? He's had 18 years of England, lives in a posh flat, wears elegant clothes and dines in the best pubs. Who needs Gorki Street?

You start supplying your own answers. Maybe he's really a spy working for Mao. But if that's his game, if he is really trying to cross the Wall to serve his Chinese masters, then a nice girl like Mia Farrow (who says she's English) would have to be a CIA agent to justify her amorous liaison with him, and maybe sooner or later she'll find a secret code sewn under the label of his Savile Row suit.

Then of course there's another possibility. Tom Courtenay plays (and very well, too) a menacing character named Gatiss. He's supposed to be a British agent but I don't believe it. He was in *Dr. Zhivago* and I'll bet he is a Russian agent—but if everyone's a Russian, then Mia Farrow must be a Chinese-Albanian.

This sort of do-it-yourself plotting is the first of the enjoyment bonuses the new breed of spy film offers. Another one is that proliferation of crisp, clever scenes. The real purpose of putting people on a screen is not to have them stand there and deliver information but to make them move. Any good director relieved of the responsibility of telling a coherent story can deliver brilliant short scenes whenever he pleases, and *Dandy* has some dandy ones: like the heart-stopper at the Nürburgring auto races where some spies (don't ask me whose) con a racing driver into plowing into the crowds so that in the subsequent stampede a good (or bad) guy can murder a bad (or good) guy.

Good and bad! Another enjoyment bonus is this absence of distinction between the two. There are no villains

or heroes—just our old friend the anti-hero. The only enemy is espionage itself, that occupation that Allen Dulles just recently referred to euphemistically as "information collecting." All the spies, except perhaps the Chinese, are buddies, a situation I can find no particular fault with. The drama is no longer dependent on the moral outcome of the caper but on the quick struggle of these professionals to reconcile themselves to their dirty business and save their expensive skins.

It is not like those realistic old days when an amateur audience could identify with an amateur non-spy like Robert Donat or Joel McCrea as he got innocently but plausibly drawn into some scrape. Then the hero—and the audience—had to have a logical explanation, a simple message about good and evil, and they always got it in the last reel. Such simple times are gone, along with old-fashioned heroes. Now there is no "message," or hardly any, and in its absence the fancy new medium has to carry the ball. In *A Dandy in Aspic* it does so with gusto and skill.

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